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AUTHOR Wagonseller, Bill R.
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ABSTRACT

A "grassroots" model for developing a parent-school partnership to help communities achieve the national Education 2000 goals is presented in this paper. The model is based on two assumptions about parenting: (1) parents are responsible for child-rearing; and (2) professionals are responsible for educating parents. Recommendations for a community-parent involvement model include developing a comprehensive parent-family wellness center at every state university and community college; organizing PTA units to develop parent education classes; creating parent education programs at each school; directing state funds for such programs; providing parent workshops in various settings; offering high school family lifestyle classes; and passing state legislation that enables school district grant-writing for developing parent education programs. Some research indicates that early intervention and parent involvement programs have resulted in improved IQs and a reduction in mental retardation among educationally disadvantaged preschool children. (LMI)

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STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A POSITIVE PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

by

Dr. Bill R. Wagonseller, Director
Parent Family Wellness Center
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The topic of parents and educators as partners is a timely one, and even more so since President George Bush's speech of September 4, 1991. In a troubling back-to-school message, the President stated that the American education system is failing. "We must blame ourselves for betraying our children," the President bluntly stated. Interestingly, the President further pressed the delicate national issue by maintaining: "the truth is all our children are at risk...if our schools fail, we can't blame Washington. We can't blame the state capitol. We must blame ourselves for betraying our children." In closing his speech, Bush told parents that today's parents' expectations of teachers are unrealistic . "We expect our teachers to function as social workers, psychologists, and counselors."

A question comes to mind. While not intending to point fingers or assign blame to our political leaders, we ask, "What if the politicians would financially support the hiring of the counselors, social workers and psychologists needed to support teachers. To answer our own question, we are thoroughly convinced that such support staffs in our nation's schools would allow teachers time to both teach and have more time to spend working with parents.

In 1990, a random nationwide survey of 21,389 public elementary and secondary schools was conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Of the teachers who responded, a whopping 97 percent answered "yes" when asked if they had encountered in the past month any student(s) with severe family problems that were hindering the child's learning.

The subject of parenting was only a minor topic of the 203-question survey of teaching conditions and attitudes. Alarming results included the fact that educators reported only drugs (30 percent) more of a threat than parenting (28 percent). Inadequate parenting undercuts American lifestyle to a greater extent than poverty, crime, AIDS, corruption and the federal deficit and environmental desecration. One teacher's response stated: "Family life has gotten much more complicated. I think most parents mean well. But they are impeded by work schedules, they are establishing second families. The problems end up on the teachers' doorsteps."

In the Fall of 1989, President Bush and fifty state governors gathered to discuss the realities of why public school children are not making the grade. The education summit members reviewed reports which addressed the problem of low academic scores, high drop-out rates, drugs and violence. Of the many reports reviewed during the meeting, only those describing parent-teacher cooperation and innovative programs for turning kids on to learning were considered "good news" on the education scene.

A major conclusion of the summit was that parents have a tremendous influence on their children's education. For change to occur, parents must realize that they are, indeed, their children's first teachers and that the primary responsibility for the education of children lies with the family. Parents should share the responsibility in decisions about their children's education and participate in community organizations which have attempted to develop a model for excellence in education.

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Since it is generally agreed that parents are their children's first teachers, parents must realize the importance of the first five years of education. During these initial years, it is recommended that parents teach values and provide an environment that promotes physical, emotional and intellectual development. This recommendation sounds quite simple, but many professionals forget that parents do not receive a "how-to" manual along with the birth of their child. Many parents find themselves inadequately prepared to meet the responsibility that goes hand in hand with being a parent.

The same national leaders who made the recommendations from the summit meeting are those that appropriate most of the monies into treatment (e.g., prisons and mental health facilities) rather than into early prevention programs. The bottom line is to pay now or pay later. It is a long journey from the hallowed halls of Congress in Washington, DC to the grassroots homes and schools of the American people in Anywhere, U.S.A. Thus recommendations to the National Governor's Association regarding the national education goals proposed by President George Bush are not realistic. People-type problems are solved by people getting involved in change. For example, during the 1980's, we witnessed the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) organization develop a grassroots swell that eventually had a direct effect on the serious societal problem of drinking and driving.

Following are the goals that President Bush has set for American education to reach by the year 2000:

* Graduate 90 percent of the students who enter high school
* Prepare students to lead the world in science and math skills
* Make sure students in grades 4, 8 and 12 can demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter.

To meet the new goals will take the effort of all Americans to strengthen our schools. Professionally, I do not believe these goals can be achieved until American society accepts two facts about parenting: (1) Parents are responsible for child rearing; and (2) professionals are responsible for educating parents. The author will attempt to present a "grassroots" model for a parent-school partnership that can assist communities in achieving goals described by President Bush. Can these lofty goals be reached in the next eight years?--certainly a challenging question!

As a member of the Nevada Governor's Commission on Educational Excellence, I believe that professionals involved in parent-teacher partnerships should be interested in and aware of the Commission's first recommendations:

School districts must develop model programs designed to achieve more parental involvement in individual schools. Such programs would include plans to:

A) Expand parent-teacher conference schedules at times convenient for parents with adequate notice of the time and purpose of the conference given to parents.

B) Design parent education programs to train parents to work with children in the home to reinforce the school programs.

C) Develop cooperation among business persons, community members and teachers to make readily accessible classes on child-rearing skills designed for future parents, classes which emphasize the importance of parental involvement in the educational process.

D) Initiate parent-involved programs designed to provide early intervention for handicapped and at-risk children.

Business, industry and other private and public employers are encouraged to give parents time off from work to attend parent-teacher conferences.

RECOMMENDED 1991 COMMUNITY PARENT INVOLVEMENT MODEL

- Every state university and community college should develop a comprehensive Parent/Family Wellness Center. The purpose of the Center would be to develop parent training materials relevant to the needs of each community. The Center should be responsible for training parent trainers to meet the needs of the community.

- For grassroots parent involvement, each school will organize a Parent Teachers Association (PTA) unit to develop Parent Education and Parent Training classes. Each PTA should re-evaluate its name and change the word "Association" to "Administration," thus creating a "Parent-Teacher Administration." Rationale for this change is that parents, teachers and administrators would form a partnership to educate children. School boards and administration could be held accountable for involving parents in the education process.

- Every school will develop and set in motion a Parent Education Program to provide expectant parents and parents of infants and toddlers with:
  - information, advice and assistance
  - resource materials
  - parenting skills
  - principles of child growth and development
  - home learning
  - positive approaches to discipline
  - development of child's self-esteem.

- Two states, Missouri and Kentucky, have directed state funds toward parent involvement programs and centers, and the results have been positive and cost effective.

- Every school will develop and implement a Parent Education Program to provide parents of elementary age students with basic skills for effective parenting. The program will assist parents in creating a strong foundation for children to develop communication skills, social values/skills and self-respect. Skills will be taught to assist parents to:
  - carry on daily communication with the child
  - demonstrate consistent and responsible behavior
  - understand child development
  - know capabilities, limitations and needs of the child
  - establish a positive learning environment
  - know how to handle and improve behavior.

- Today's families come in many different styles and shapes. Fathers work while mothers stay home and many parents both work. There are many single parents, blended families (yours, mine and ours), unmarried couples with children and "sandwich families." Clearly, we are at the forefront of a change in the American family. To assist the changing family, we must offer a variety of parent training programs in various settings. For example, the workplace could offer "Lunch and Learn" parenting classes, sessions to be set up as a partnership between school district and employer. School districts could provide trained instructors to conduct workshops in the workplace.

- One of the most important aims of the model is to have every high school develop a family lifestyle class for students which would address the pros and cons of different family make-ups in the1990's. The class could give prospective (and some who are already) parents a much-needed manual to help them through the challenges, issues and rewards they will face in their life-time endeavor. The goals of the program would be to provide teenagers with a realistic picture to the responsibilities of raising a child in the 1990's.

- Churches should offer specific training in developmental, emotional, physical and social skills. The classes should follow the Lamaze-type classes and continue through adolescent-age years. Family lifestyle classes (e.g., single-parent, blended and "sandwich" families) should be conducted in the church setting.

- When politicians are seeking office, from the President of the United States to local city officials, they preach about how we need parent involvement. After elections, other issues seem to have a priority for funding. It is a known fact that preventive-type programs are not sufficiently funded. For the recommended Parent Involvement Model to become a reality, state legislators should establish appropriations to enable local school districts to write grants for development and operation of a Parent Education or Parent Training Program.

The following research sponsored by the National Health Education Consortium, a coalition of private and federal agencies, support Early Intervention and Parent Involvement programs.

- Early help boosts IQs of poor tots.

- Mental retardation in poor children can be reduced up to 50% through intensive education and health programs begun in infancy, says a study to be released today.

- Findings show "We can make a difference," says co-author Craig T. Ramey, University of Alabama, Birmingham, who has studied more than 1,000 children.

- The IQ scores of children nurtured with such programs from infancy to age 3 averaged 20 points higher than a control group in one of a series of Ramey's multiracial studies. Ninety-five percent of those in early intervention scored in the normal IQ range, compared to 49% in the control group. An IQ score of at least 85 is "normal"; 70 or below is considered mentally retarded.

- Early intervention included five days a week in a child development center.